Undercover MCA SERIES

1.Early days 1990-95

Emerging from the Urahara (shortened form of Ura Harajuku, or “Hidden Harajuku”) fashion scene, Undercover was founded by Jun Takahashi with Hironori Ichinose sometime between 1989 and 1990 while they were students at Bunka College (Inchinose would later leave Undercover and establish VANDALIZE in 1996). Interestingly, unlike many of the progenitors of Urahara who primarily created menswear and sportswear, Takahashi maintained an interest in womenswear. In addition to Undercover post-graduation, Jun wrote newspaper columns with former classmate and friend, Nigo of BAPE while selling Undercover’s clothes at various shops around Tokyo. After some moderate success, Nigo approached Takahashi and they opened the legendary store NOWHERE in April 1993.

Since establishing the brand, Jun has alternated focus between his men’s and women’s collections at times doing runway presentations or lookbook exhibitions based on what Jun felt suited the collection best. Jun started presenting runways for his women’s collections around Tokyo with the first one being presented on April 18th,1994. Suzy Menkes remarked: “*Undercover’s first runway show underscored the philosophical and aesthetic foundations of the brand. Street-Style basics…Symbolic punk elements such as mohair and tartan are indispensable to the Undercover worldview”.* The next two collections would further develop the punk themes and motifs that set Undercover’s foundation. AW1995 was alternatively titled “Last Show” and intended to cap off his first three collections and treat them as a single unit. The idea of treating collections as an interrelated series rather than totally independent of one another is an integral part of the Undercover universe that has been utilized as a creative device in much of Jun’s later work. AW1995 was also the first-time photographer Yoshie Tominaga would be introduced to Undercover’s work. It was also around this time that hairstylist Katsuya Kamo would start collaborating with Jun.

2. The Second Trilogy: Exchange, Relief, Ambivalence AW1998-AW1999 and Undercover’s “Dark Fantasy”

After a mix of exhibitions and runway presentations, Undercover’s next major turning point was the trilogy of collections Exchange, Relief, and Ambivalence. Building off the ideas explored in SS1998 “Drape”, Takahashi

identified these collections as some of his favorite and most important in the development of Undercover. Speaking about AW1998 “Exchange” in 2015: “*The season was a big thing for me, a turning point. …I finally became proud in draping or making clothes three-dimensionally, and people around me started to highly estimate my works”.* This trilogy also expanded on the idea of basic items stripped of superfluous elements. “Exchange” consisted of up of clothes with interchangeable parts coming from the concept of a toy or a dress-up doll. SS1999 “Relief” featured *Atari* (the Japanese word for the faded colour on a well-worn pair of jeans) on parts of the clothes prone to wear. Presumably, the season was called “Relief” for the sculptural relief effect created by the *Atari.* AW1999 “Ambivalenc” e was based around the concept of reversible clothes and presented on twin models an idea revisited later for SS2004 “Languid”.

The ideas of this trilogy were quite straightforward and grounded as was much of Takahashi’s output up until this point: punk references, basic clothes, draping, a strong emphasis on graphic design etc. However, this all changed in SS2002 with “The Illusion of Haze” models were engulfed in frill and lace, translucent fabrics that appeared like a haze making figures appear ethereal. This collection marked the beginning of Undercover’s “Dark Fantasy” which was developed in a period from about 2002-2006 where Takahashi explored surrealism, fairy tales, doll-making, and fantasy elements through his clothes. This is the period that has come to define Undercover to many fans and contains a myriad of the brands most iconic and coveted pieces.

3. 2002-2006 Paris debut, tailoring, deconstruction, and but beautiful…

Undercover’s debut collection in Paris was SS2003’s SCAB, one of the most iconic collections in Jun’s canon this show would be the first time the Western fashion media would see Undercover. Jun’s work made an immediate and lasting impact with Hillary Alexander of The Daily Telegraph calling it a *“bizarre curtain raiser”* and Sarah Mower of American Vogue reflecting upon it in 2014 said “*There was just something coming from a completely fresh, non-aggressive viewpoint. There was something gentle, something odd and mysterious about it.”*

After the impact of “Scab” Jun would continue presenting in Paris and keeping with the idea of interconnected series created the “But Beautiful…” collections from 2004 until 2006. These collections presented many concepts and motifs that would go onto define the world of Undercover. Experiments

with doll and toy making, masks and hair created in collaboration with Katsuya Kamo, Pop cultural references such as the homage to Czech surrealist filmmaker Jan Svankmajer , a collaboration with Patti Smith, and constant deconstruction and reconstruction of tailoring and garments all helped establish Undercover's universe of Dark Fantasy.

Much of this period was photographed by Yoshie Tominaga who created handmade books of photos after every season for Jun, eventually compiling them into the Photo documentary "the Shepard"

4. Middle era, Technical garments/material

Departing from the dark and surreal universe of the"*but..beautiful..."* collections Takahashi moved into new territory for Undercover. From AW2007 to roughly AW2010 Jun explored and developed ideas relating to technical materials. AW2007 "Knit" and AW2009 "Earmuff Maniac" served as foundations to this period by exploring the concept of using knit material for outerwear. From there Jun experimented with materials such as OUTLAST®, GORETEX®, and DIAPLEX®. Additionally, Undercover created all over printed jackets, expanded their graphic motifs on outerwear, and developed various translucent polyurethane pockets. All of which are now motifs interwoven into the DNA of the brand. Undercover traded Paris for Florence by presenting SS2010 "Less but Better" during Pitti Uomo 76. The Dieter Rams inspired collection was minimal and industrial but, maintained a focus on sharp modern tailoring with technical materials.

It has been rumored that the financial crises of 2008 had an adverse effect on Undercover. Whether or not that's true AW2008 "Unrealrealclothes" was based around the idea that *"each item is an unique reinvention of mass-produced fashion that turns on its head the standard theory on form, details, or material-an antidote to the blind pursuit of mass produced fashion so often seen today."* Jun continued to be dissatisfied with the fashion system and in AW2010 "Avakareta Life" printing his manifesto "the mentality of reverse running" on the inside of garments. Jun appeared to be fed up with the fashion system and returned to the prudent design philosophy of creating basic clothing free of unnecessary decoration.

5. Return to Basics, diffusion lines, Gyakusou, endless pop culture references, collaborations

Jun who is an avid runner himself launched a line of running shoes and activewear with Nike called Gyakusou in 2010, followed by the John and Sue

Undercover diffusion lines in 2013. Much of the rest of the 2010s is defined by Jun's pop cultural, music and art references in collections. Krautrock group Can has appeared multiple times along with musical artists like Frank Zappa, Jesus and the Mary Chain, Television and The Talking Heads, films like The Warriors, A Clockwork Orange Throne of Blood and Nosferatu, and the artwork of Cindy Sherman and Michaël Borremans have all made appearances or served as inspiration for collections. Never one to shy away from mixing high fashion and streetwear Jun collaborated with Supreme, Valentino, and Off White during the mid to late 2010s. Undercover has even branched out into toy design. Doll making, perfumes, art exhibitions, films, animation and just about any creative endeavor you can think of.

Throughout the history of the brand Undercover has steadily developed a multifaceted and immersive universe that covers everything from streetwear to technical clothing to punk to couture. Jun Takahashi has managed to build one of the most beloved and iconic fashion brands of the last 30 years and his longevity as a designer is a testament to the strength of his creative vision.

6. KEV THE WORLD, the enduring legacy of UNDERCOVER

Currently Undercover's design legacy and influence is as strong as ever. My Clothing Archive spoke to @kevtheworld a graduate of Central Saint Martins about their graduate collection and its relation to Undercover.

The collection named "immediate relief solutions" was made with DIY methodologies, based on the idea of in the event of disaster striking using whatever materials and unconventional parts to protect the body and self. The collection ended up being broken down into 2 portrayals of a disaster event: victims and survivors. The collection went on to hint at various toxicities and societal issues today while offering a new perspective on "anti-luxury" and how far you can push until it's no longer luxurious. All materials where either found/ abandoned/ acquired or from previous work experiences, additionally he received a fabric sponsorship from Komatsu Seiren. The accessories were informed by a proposal He did for Hussein Chalayan the year before, which was critiqued by Chalayan himself.

Speaking on Undercover and his collection Kevtheworld said:

“Jun is definitely one of my favourite designers. For this collection, I would say Doublet, Walter VB, Takahiro all played a part in shaping who I wanted to give back to in terms of homage. You can probably tell the SS2003 “Scab” collection was an influence but, that era of his work in general has a permanent fix in my mind of what I am pointing towards. Additionally, Shinichiro Arakawa’s work in general, and this documentary I saw of how he designed the Honda kit helped me realize appreciation of various sensitivities and how they can be interpreted differently. Whether it be color, weight, texture, technique. I’ve helped Undercover since 2018 until the SS2020 “Fallen Man” collection. My perspective has been massively altered in how I see showcasing and defining product breakdown smoothly across a collection.